



Capt. "Sporto," a B-1B Lancer weapon system officer, and 13th Bomb Squadron airmen at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, are ready for the task if there is a war with Iraq. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Jack Braden) | [High-res version of this photo](#)

Dyess aircrews poised for bomb runs over Iraq

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas
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01/15/03 - **DYESS AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** -- While the United States prepares for a possible war with Iraq, aircrews at this B-1B Lancer base have not changed their training routine.

The airmen are not yet part of the huge U.S. military buildup that has taken thousands of troops to bases in Southwest Asia, but they know they will play a key role in a showdown with Iraq.

It is the same job 7th Bomb Wing aircrews have always done, and the one they have been doing since the start of the war on terrorism: putting bombs on target. Wing crews have flown more than 300 bombing sorties over Afghanistan without incident.

A switch to targets in Iraq will not change their task.

"We're ready for whatever mission we have to do, wherever it is," said a 13th Bomb Squadron aircraft commander who goes by the call sign "Digit." A lieutenant colonel, he has piloted Lancers for more than a decade and has flown 18 combat missions over Afghanistan.

"That's what we train for every day," he said. "What we do."

But unlike Afghanistan, where there are few threats to the high-flying Lancers, flying over Iraq is fraught with danger. There, bombers face threats from fighter aircraft and a formidable integrated air defense system of anti-aircraft artillery and missiles. It is a system U.S. aircraft test each day as they enforce the U.N. mandated no-fly zones on Iraq's northern and southern borders.

"The defensive threats in Iraq are drastically different than what we face in Afghanistan," said "Sporto," a 13th BS captain. "Penetrating it will be more difficult."

The captain, a Lancer offensive and defensive weapon systems officer, also has 18 combat sorties over Afghanistan. He and his squadron train like before, but he admits he and others are focusing more on the skills needed to penetrate Iraqi air defenses. But that is not all.

"We also want to make sure we have no friendly fire incidents," he said.

Digit said all Dyess aircrews are aware of the Iraqi threats and continue to train like they always have. From making sure their shot records are up to date, to studying threats, everyone is staying as proficient in their jet as possible.

"We're doing all the things to be ready to go to war," he said. "That's normal for us."

But the prospect of another war with Iraq has had a noticeable effect on wing crews. Digit's seen more "lean-forwardness" in everyone's poise.

Maybe last week's deployment of Lancers from Dyess' sister wing at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D., to forward bases near Iraq had something to do with that. Dyess airmen know they are likely the next to go.

Capt. David Honchul, 7th BW public affairs chief, said the wing is not deploying at this time.

"But we're ready for our turn when Ellsworth's forces return home," he said.

When -- and if -- that time comes, "Sardot" said he's ready to go. A 13th BS pilot, the first lieutenant has been flying the jet for one year. The training has prepared him, he said.

"The only difference I see in flying a training mission and a combat sortie over Iraq is the location -- and that we'll be dropping live weapons," Sardot said. "Other than that, it's pretty much standard operations for us."

But "standard ops" for Lancer crews is no piece of cake. When Dyess crews fly sorties over Afghanistan, their missions are a grueling 30 to 36 hours long. Sorties to Iraq would last as long. In the aircraft's cramped crew compartment -- where an ant would have a hard time getting comfortable -- the crew must focus on their mission.

Near their target, Lancers team up with a strike package that could include more than 100 aircraft. The strike force may also have fighters, tankers, surveillance, command and control and other aircraft, plus possibly aircraft from other services and allied nations.

That is when the "simulated duress" of training turns into real sweat, Sardot said. When the Lancer's four crewmembers -- aircraft commander, pilot, offensive and defensive weapon systems officer, or WSOs -- must work as one.

It is the only way the bomber can successfully deliver its deadly cargo of up to 24 2,000-pound bombs, either "dumb" or "smart" satellite-guided joint defense attack munitions. The smart bombs can hit 24 different targets on one mission.

"We've been flying combat missions for more than a year - and been quite effective," said "Ziploc," a 13th BS WSO. Ziploc, a captain, has flown 19 combat missions over Afghanistan

A switch to bombing Iraq will not come as a surprise, he said. And it will not bring many changes to the way wing crews operate. Real missions are like training flights, and that is good, he said.

"Because introducing new ways to do thing(s) could cause errors in our procedures," he said.

Ziploc turns on the hip-hop music to pass the time and "fire up" his crew on long missions. He is confident of his abilities and those of the other members of his squadron, nicknamed "The Devils Own Grim Reapers."

"All I have to do is get my hat, and I'm ready to go," he said. "We're all ready to go."

Related Images

Capt. "Ziploc," 1st Lt. "Sardot," and Capt. "Sporto" head for their B-1B Lancer bomber on the flightline at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. Airmen from the 7th Bomb Wing are standing by in case they are needed to take part in any conflict with Iraq. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Jack Braden)

